

from the Author
A 10,
S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT
THE TOWER OF LONDON,

ON FRIDAY, 28th OF FEBRUARY, 1794,

Being the Day appointed for

A GENERAL FAST;

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berough.*

L O N D O N:

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S E R M O N.

NEHEMIAH, 9th chap. 1st and 2d verses.

*" Now in the twenty and fourth day of this
" month, the children of Israel were assembled
" with fasting, and with sackcloths, and earth
" upon them.—And the seed of Israel separated
" themselves from all strangers, and stood and
" confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their
" fathers."*

FROM the remotest periods of antiquity, to the present moment, the history of mankind furnishes us with one general detail of vice and folly.—The refinement of modern ages hath only varied the form and modifications of evil, but never could utterly prevent its fatal progression.—Amidst the splendid discoveries of literature, or the boasted advancement in philosophy, nothing could eradicate that moral depravation which is coeval with fallen man.

To religion we are indebted for that triumph of wisdom, which regulates our affections, and amends our practice, whereby we fill our respective stations in a way, and manner, which indicates a consciousness of future responsibility. Thus, under every public, or private calamity, our appeal must be made to God. We must confess our entire dependence on his providence, and look to him alone for relief. In every pursuit, the great first cause will be acknowledged, as all human efforts are only subordinate means to fulfil the purposes of God, and accomplish the plans of unerring wisdom.—Thus, conscious how justly they had provoked the majesty of heaven, we find—“In the twenty and fourth day of the month, the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackcloths, and earth upon them.—And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood, and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.”—These words suggest to us,

1. The duty of public fasting and humiliation, with the manner in which it ought to be performed.
2. The influence, and effect, to be produced on our conduct and behaviour.

That nations are bound to acknowledge their dependence on Supreme Munificence, no less than individuals, is a proposition which few can reasonably dispute. For the duty required of them collectively, is only that which we are individually enjoined to perform. Hence we find the children of Israel “ assembled together, with fasting, and with sackcloths, and earth upon them.” It was the common cause of public humiliation, in which they united with the fervour of religious zeal. Whatever differences of opinion might exist in other respects, they all agreed in this, that each individual had sinned against a God of infinite love, mercy, forbearance, and compassion. When they reflected on their wonderful deliverance out of Egypt,—their preservation in the Red Sea,—their miraculous support through a dreary wilderness,—and the unceasing proofs of divine goodness; they viewed their own ingratitude with abhorrence, humiliation, and self-abasement!—Could they think on the manna and quails from heaven, the water flowing from a rock, and the pillar of fire to guide them thro’ a lonely desert; without deploring the turpitude, and guilt of sin?

Let us then quit the history of Israel, and briefly consider our own.—Do we not enjoy as a

nation those privileges for which we have hourly cause to be grateful? Is not a God of mercy loading us with benefits, and showering upon us a rich diffusion of blessings? Have we not the inestimable treasure of gospel truth, and a Christian revelation in our hands? Are we not secured by our civil privileges from the lawless depredations of plunderers—or the desperate efforts of a tumultuous crowd? Do not commerce, arts, and manufacture raise us to a pinnacle of envied and unequalled splendour, amidst the surrounding nations of the earth? Is there a nation under the canopy of heaven, which hath experienced more signal mercies from an indulgent God? Reflect then on the base returns we have made, the mercies we have abused, and then the duty of this day will be obvious and undeniable. We have abundant reason as a nation to be humbled in dust and ashes on account of our numerous provocations. We may say with the Prophet of old—"We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled even by departing from thy precepts, and from thy judgments.*"

The duty then of national humiliation cannot be denied, unless it is by those who have re-

* DANIEL, 9th and 5th.

nounced every sense of religious, or moral obligations; or who have relinquished the rational doctrines of Christianity, for the wild effusions of a visionary, and false philosophy. Examples of public fasting were frequent in former ages. Joshua, and the elders of Israel, were prostrate before the ark, from morning until evening, without eating, when the Israelites were defeated by the men of Ai.* The eleven tribes who had taken arms against Benjamin, fell down before the ark on their faces, and continued fasting till the evening. Moses fasted forty days on Mount Horeb,† and our blessed Lord fasted forty days and forty nights. Though these two instances were miraculous, and preternatural, yet we find our Lord gives us directions how this duty should be performed; not with hypocrisy, or ostentation, but with sincerity, and a single view to the glory of God. Men may be deceived by the outward forms of devotion; but God searcheth the inmost recesses of the heart. The manner then in which these days of national humiliation ought to be conducted,—is by a serious reviewal of our past lives,—a strict enquiry into our public and private vices,—an open confession of sin,—deep contrition on account of it,—and a real wish

* JOSHUA, 7th and 4th. † EXOD. 34th and 28th.

to forsake our former errors, and amend our future practice.

The characteristic features of every age, are manifest in the prevalence of particular virtues, or vices. The present times are perhaps emblazoned by the most splendid, and boundless acts of charity, that ever the universe beheld. In this instance we may vie perhaps with surrounding nations, and claim a title to unrivalled honour. But though charity be confessedly the ornament of our age, and nation, yet how fatally is the radiance of this brightest virtue obscured, by the growth of infidelity, and the boundless extent of dissipation!—We have not, it is true, like a neighbouring country, openly avowed the creed of atheists,—or trampled on the bonds of moral obligation; but under the specious illusions of affected liberality, we have made unassisted reason the standard of truth, and have rejected the sacred volumes of inspiration. This melancholy trait of progressive Deism, is not only evident in our modern histories, philosophic essays, and other lucubrations of the age; but also in the general contempt of religious duties, and the almost total neglect of public worship. Whilst places of amusement, and dissipation, are

crowded with unabating ardour, our churches are neglected and forsaken.

And as the omission of one duty usually leads to the neglect of others, we find the same spirit which prevents a regular attendance on religious worship, infuses itself into all the various concerns of life. Being creatures of habit, and governed by the influence of example, we no sooner acquire a general indifference to the positive duties of religion, than every other social obligation loses its constraining power. False notions of right and wrong, issue from the corrupted fountain of infidelity, and contaminate every channel of information through which they flow. The duties of our proper station are necessarily forgotten, when we omit our duty to God. If the mind of man be not awed, or rather regulated, by the dictates of religion, which court enquiry, but curb licentiousness; there is no restraint which can be found permanent, efficacious, or beneficial. To the progress of infidelity, we may ascribe that restless and tumultuous spirit, which flatters the ignorant, and deceives the wise. The mild, and gentle influence of religion, inspires us with contentment, and dignifies the meanest station by a course of well-doing.

But a contempt of the sacred writings gives us erroneous notions of human nature,—and leads us through the mazes of an excursive fancy, to plan theories which can never be reduced into practice. The true character of man can only be known from the word of God. And there we find, from the corruption of the human heart, that restraints are requisite to maintain order, which is the life and soul of all civilized communities. Could we verge into a state of barbarism, we might relax the bonds of social union, and be enriched by the spoils of industry ; but this would be only the triumph of the moment, and the final curse of folly. We are taught indeed by the pattern, and example, of Christ, to “ Render unto Cæsar, the things that are Cæsar’s ; and to God, the things that are God’s.” We are also further instructed by St. Paul, to “ Render to all their dues : tribute, to whom tribute is due ; custom, to whom custom ; fear, to whom fear ; honour, to whom honour.” Thus the religion we profess arranges the duties of every station, without infringing on the claims of any, and renders us happy by living in unity of spirit, and in the bonds of peace.

Hence the infidelity of the age yields abundant cause for national humiliation. Nor is it con-

* MATT. 22d and 21st. † ROM. 13th and 7th.

finer to speculative errors, but extends its baneful effects much further. Not only frivolity of manners, but also boundless habits of expenditure, are among the numerous evils which have arisen from the progress of infidelity. To a total want of œconomy may be too often ascribed those numerous failures which involve the credulous, and unsuspecting, and allure the youth of our age, and nation, to other concomitant vices. The exploded virtues of antiquity, which taught men to limit their wants, in order to increase their pleasures, are now succeeded by a splendid exterior, expensive habits, and other fashionable follies. The artificial wants incurred by a course of extravagance, are supplied by unlawful means, and impel us from the unheeded commission of one crime to the fatal indulgence of others. To the claims of luxury, and dissipation, the most sacred ties of honour or honesty have been prostituted; and the bonds of every social compact forfeited to the vassalage of outward appearances. If industry be a mean of promoting national wealth, and prosperity, œconomy is no less necessary to preserve it.

As a direful, and ruinous expedient to supply the wants of extravagance, we find gaming too frequently resorted to; and which unhappily

forms a melancholy characteristic of our age, and nation. The visible consequences of this baneful vice are too obvious to be denied. They hurry their deluded votaries from one fatal extreme to another, until they are plunged into the irresistible horrors of despair, and suicide. The progression of vices is hourly manifest, and the crimes we should shudder at on one occasion, we eventually commit on another. The vice of gaming is productive of multifarious evils, and the common prelude to ruin. Amidst the numerous reasons for national humiliation, we may add one on account of that flagitious, and prevalent crime of profane swearing. The horrid oaths, and dreadful imprecations, which assail our ears, may justly incur the severest punishment. This vice is a daring insult on the Majesty of Heaven, and the ungratifying emanation of a depraved mind. It is a vice to which there appears scarcely any temptation, because language hath furnished us with more suitable expressions to convey our ideas of disapprobation or resentment.

Shall dependent creatures dare to abuse the name of God, or profane it with impious contempt, and senseless indifference? May we not say with the Prophet on a former occasion, that

—“ Because of swearing the land mourneth? ”*

—“ Shall I not visit for these things saith the Lord : shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this ? ”†—Whilst we supplicate the Lord of Hosts to go forth with our fleets, and armies, let us be justly humbled on account of profane swearing, which is highly offensive to God, and utterly unprofitable to men. Let us often reflect with self-abasement on the unwarrantable freedoms we have taken with that Holy name, at which angels bow, and veil their faces with reverential awe.—A contempt also of the sabbath, is another prominent feature of national depravity. This holy day, which the Lord hath set apart for himself, is dedicated to pleasure, recreation, and every idle amusement. Instead of being kept holy according to the strict command of God, it is with many, a day of business, riot, or dissipation. And if even a part of this day is kept holy, to satisfy the clamours of conscience, the remainder is devoted to idleness, and folly.

To the common profanation of the Lord's day, may be ascribed the most extensive evils, which subvert the laws of order, and corrupt the manners of the rising generation. By a neglect of this important duty, we find youth forgetting

JEREMIAH, 23d and 10th.

Joh and 29th.

their proper, and necessary subjection to parents, and thoughtless parents training their children to destruction. From a remissness in the duties of religion, hath arisen a spirit destructive to the peace, and welfare of communities; in which a vile system of anarchy is iniquitously preferred to the invaluable blessings of regularity, security, and good order. Let Britons then more immediately deplore every thing that can make them forget their mercies, or abuse their benefits! May not also those who profess the gospel of Christ lament this day, with deep contrition, their departure from the ways of God? Is there not a visible declension in the zeal, and holiness of those who know the truth as it is in Jesus, not only in theory, but experimentally? How little is manifest, of the love of God shed abroad in our hearts, by the general tenor of our lives! Do we see those who profess a steady dependence on the atonement of Christ, sufficiently anxious to adorn their profession of the gospel? Is not a kind of speculative, or unproductive faith, too manifest among those who are called Christians? and how little do we estimate the value of gospel truth, when so many, in former ages, have sacrificed their lives in defence of it. Let us, then, on this day of public humiliation, openly confess our sins, like the Israelites of old,

and implore the divine forgiveness. Let us confess, that if God were strict to mark iniquity, none of us could stand before him. That it is owing to his infinite forbearance we are yet continued in being; and to his sovereign, unmerited grace, that we have any hopes of future glory. Let us prize with gratitude, and meditate with attention, on that glorious revelation of pardoning mercy contained in the gospel of Christ. Let us reflect with unabating praises on the wonders of redeeming love, on that blissful scheme of redemption, wherein justice and mercy unite without violating the claims of either; where the atonement of Christ is the foundation of our hopes, and a life of holiness, the tribute of gratitude, or the necessary fruit of faith. In this manner let a day of public fasting be conducted, that our prayers may be like the incense of a service holy, acceptable unto God.

The next consideration, which the duties of this day naturally suggest, is—the influence and effect to be produced on our conduct and behaviour. Amidst the various differences of opinion, there is one in which we must universally agree, and that is, the necessity of a general amendment of life. The most exemplary among us, will, on a reviewal of his past conduct, find many

things which ought to be avoided, and improved. With an eye turned inwards, to the legislation, or discipline of the heart, we shall be less disposed to interfere with the outward reformation of the world. The government of our own passions, under the influence of divine grace, will preoccupy our thoughts, and extend its mild and peaceable influence to every station that we fill. Then will contentment diminish our wants, and increase our pleasures. We shall travel through this vale of tears without the restless turbulence of ambition, or the visionary projects of a mistaken judgment. Like faithful stewards, we shall in all our actions have a constant reference to that great day when we must be accountable to God; and thus the religion we profess, will render us good subjects, and useful members of the community. Being united on this awful occasion to implore the divine favour and protection, and to seek the forgiveness of our sins; let us beware of every seductive error that can make us forget our duty to God,—to our king, to our country—and to ourselves. Let us remember, that our only security under God, depends on a firm determination to be *unanimous*. That instead of loosing the bonds of social obligation, for the ruinous expedients of *despotic anarchy*; we may *unite* in the defence of

religion, and order,—of truth, and rectitude. A sincere repentance for our past sins, and an earnest solicitude to forsake them, will be the most happy consequence of a day of public fasting and humiliation. That as every calamity is the bitter fruit of sin, each individual may seriously ask his own conscience—*What have I done* to contribute to the boundless evils of human depravity?—Under the auspices of divine grace, an enquiry thus conducted, may produce the most lasting, and beneficial effects. It will incline every man to love his neighbour,—tho' he will be highly displeased with himself. Thus will it be seen, that religion is the most effectual method of uniting men in the regular discharge of their duty; teaching you to act “As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.—Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the King.”*

* 1st PETER, 2d. 16th and 17th.

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 ever so contribute to the downfall of my
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 induce every man to his neighbour—no
 he will be filled with himself. That
 will be the result of the most faithful
 and of turning men to the regular observance
 of their duty, teaching them to be
 and not being your health, but a close of health
 others, but as the friends of God, I know
 all men. Love the brethren, love God.
 Bless us the King.



All praise be to him who is
 the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.